

DATeline: WASHINGTON, D.C. #133
ALINA ZERANSKI

DECEMBER 1, 1976

VISITORS' SERVICES CENTER: A LINK WITH THE OUTSIDE
(INSERTS AVAILABLE IN TAPE LIBRARY)

ANNCR: DATeline:WASHINGTON, D.C. -- PICTURES IN SOUND OF PEOPLE, PLACES AND EVENTS HERE IN THE CAPITAL OF THE UNITED STATES -- BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE VOICE OF AMERICA EACH WEEK AT THIS TIME. TODAY, A REPORT PREPARED BY ALINA ZERANSKI ABOUT AN ORGANIZATION EXTENDING A HAND TO THOSE TEMPORARILY OUTSIDE SOCIETY TO HELP THEM WHEN THEY RETURN.

NARR: VISITORS' SERVICES CENTER IS LIKE NO OTHER OFFICE IN WASHINGTON D.C. THE ROOMS ARE MESSY AND CLUTTERED WITH OLD FURNITURE AND PILES OF PAPERS. HERE, AN OLD PRIEST SITS, READING COURT RECORDS WHILE A CHILD ANSWERS A PHONE. A FRAIL WOMAN IN A FLOWERED HAT, WHO MUST BE AT LEAST 80 YEARS OLD, IS TRYING TO BRING ABOUT SOME ORDER IN THE OVERFLOW OF PAPERS IN RUSTY FILING CABINETS.

THE OFFICES OF THE VISITORS SERVICES CENTER, HOWEVER, ARE CONVENIENTLY LOCATED FOR THE PURPOSES OF THE ORGANIZATION. THEY ARE IN A SMALL HOUSE NEAR THE CITY JAIL, AND THE CENTER TRIES CONSTANTLY TO REACH INSIDE THOSE PRISON WALLS.

TAPE: CUT ONE -- CUNNINGHAM

"THE GOALS OF VISITORS' SERVICES CENTER ARE PRIMARILY TO SERVE AS A COMMUNICATION LINK FOR PRISONERS WHO ARE CONFINED IN THE D.C. JAIL PRISON SYSTEM, A COMMUNICATION LINK WITH THEIR FAMILIES, WITH THEIR LAWYERS AND WITH OTHER PEOPLE IN THE COMMUNITY THAT ARE IMPORTANT TO THEM NOW AND MAYBE UPON THEIR RELEASE, SPECIFICALLY EMPLOYERS, AND PEOPLE THAT CAN GET THEM IN TRAINING PROGRAMS WHEN THEY ARE RELEASED."

NARR: THAT WAS ANN CUNNINGHAM, DIRECTOR OF THE VISITORS, SERVICES CENTER. SHE IS A YOUNG WOMAN WITH A COLLEGE DEGREE AND PLENTY OF EXPERIENCE AND INTEREST IN PRISON PROBLEMS. SHE, THE OTHER FIVE PERSONS EMPLOYED HERE, AND THE VOLUNTEERS COMING IN AND OUT, ALL SEEM TO BE DRESSED IN BLUE JEANS, FADED BLOUSES AND JACKETS.

TAPE: CUT TWO -- CUNNINGHAM

"VSC IS A PRIVATE SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCY. WE ARE SERVICE ORIENTED. WE DO NOT GET INVOLVED IN REFORM. WE ARE NOT INDIFFERENT TO IT, BUT SPECIFICALLY OUR EFFORTS ARE GEARED TOWARDS THE INDIVIDUAL REQUESTS OF INMATES SERVING IN THE SYSTEM. WE ARE FUNDED BY THE UNITED WAY WHICH IS THE LOCAL WASHINGTON'S FUND RAISING AGENCY. WE GET ABOUT FORTY PERCENT OF OUR FUNDS FROM UNITED WAY. A LARGE PART OF OUR FUNDS, AS WELL, ANOTHER FORTY PERCENT COMES FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE'S LAW ENFORCEMENT ASSISTANCE ADMINISTRATION. AND THE REMAINING COMES FROM PRIVATE CONTRIBUTIONS OF INDIVIDUALS AND SMALL FOUNDATIONS."

NARR: THIS WAS ALL STARTED SIX YEARS AGO BY A PRIEST WHO WORKED IN D.C. JAILS. WHEN HE WALKED THROUGH THE CELLS EVERY DAY ON ON HIS VISITS, HE HEARD A VARIETY OF REQUESTS: "CAN YOU CALL MY LAWYER, I HAVEN'T HEARD FROM HIM IN FOUR MONTHS." "CAN YOU CALL MY MOTHER AND ASK HER TO BRING ME A SHIRT FOR THE TRIAL?" SOMEONE ELSE NEEDED HIS FALSE TEETH, LEFT BEHIND AT THE TIME OF HIS ARREST. THE REQUESTS WERE JUST OVERWHELMING. THERE WAS AN OBVIOUS NEED FOR SOMEONE INTERESTED IN HELPING OUT TO VISIT THE INMATES IN THE WASHINGTON'S JAILS. THE PRIEST FOUND SUCH PEOPLE. TODAY, THERE ARE CLOSE TO EIGHTY VOLUNTEERS WORKING IN THIS ORGANIZATION.

TAPE: CUT THREE -- CUNNINGHAM

"THE MAJORITY OF OUR VOLUNTEERS ARE WHITE AND THEY COME FROM THE WASHINGTON COMMUNITY. THEY ARE NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENTATIVE OF, LET'S SAY, THE PRISON POPULATION AT ALL, BUT THEY ARE PEOPLE WHO HAVE AN INTEREST AND A CONCERN AND WHO HAVE THE TIME AVAILABLE. FOR THE MOST PART, OUR VOLUNTEERS ARE EITHER STUDENTS, OR THEY ARE HOUSEWIVES. WE HAVE SOME RETIRED PEOPLE..."

NARR: ALL VOLUNTEERS RECEIVE SPECIAL TRAINING. THEY GO TO THE POLICE STATION AND THE COURTS. THEY ATTEND TRIALS AND DISCUSS PROBLEMS WITH THE CENTER'S STAFF. THEY LISTEN TO LECTURES PREPARING THEM TO HANDLE DIFFICULT CASES. THE PROBLEMS THEY ENCOUNTER MAY BE QUITE DRAMATIC, BUT MOST ARE ROUTINE, MATTER-OF-FACT, TERRIDLY IMPORTANT SERVICES. THESE VOLUNTEERS HELP THE PRISONERS FEEL THAT ALL TIES ARE NOT BROKEN, THAT THEY STILL ARE PART OF THEIR SOCIETY, AND SOME DAY AFTER THEY HAVE SERVED THEIR TIME, THERE WILL BE SOMETHING WAITING FOR THEM, THERE WILL BE A LIFE TO RESUME. SOMETIMES IT HAPPENS THAT A VOLUNTEER, BY A FEW PHONE CALLS, CAN PROVIDE ENOUGH EVIDENCE OF A MISUNDERSTANDING FOR THE PRISONER TO BE RELEASED. AND SOME OF THE VOLUNTEERS SPEND UP TO FIVE DAYS A WEEK ON THEIR TASKS. SYLVIA ARMOUR IS A MOTHER OF SIX WHO COMES HERE EVERY SECOND DAY.

TAPE: CUT FOUR -- ARMOUR

"WHEN MY YOUNGEST CHILD ENTERED FIRST GRADE, I HAD TIME ON MY HANDS. SO I DECIDED TO TAKE A VOLUNTEER JOB. AND IT SEEMED TO ME THAT PRISONERS WERE THE LEAST POPULAR PEOPLE ONE CAN MEET, THEREFORE VERY FEW PEOPLE WORK FOR THEM."

NARR: SYLVIA IS A FREQUENT VISITOR IN THE COURTS, ASSISTING INMATES AND GIVING THEM MORAL SUPPORT. SHE RUNS TO HOSPITALS VISITING SOME PRISONER'S MOTHER OR CHILD. SHE BABY SITS WHEN A WIFE GOES TO SEE HER HUSBAND IN THE JAIL. SYLVIA'S INVOLVEMENT WITH THE PRISONERS HAS LED HER TO A NEW LIFE. SHE IS STUDYING CRIMINAL JUSTICE.

TAPE: CUT FIVE -- ARMOUR

"I THINK, IT'S A VERY VALUABLE WORK. I THINK, IT MEANS A GREAT DEAL TO THEM IF YOU JUST GO IN. SOMETIMES, THEY ASK ME, WHY I DO IT, YOU KNOW - WHY DO YOU BOTHER, WHY DO YOU CARE? IT MEANS A GREAT DEAL TO THEM THAT PEOPLE DO CARE, THAT THEY ARE NOT FORGOTTEN. SOMETIMES WE ARE THEIR ONLY CONTACT WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD. SOME OF THEM, THEY HAVE NO FRIENDS OR RELATIVES IN THE AREA. THEY WOULD NOT EVER GET A VISIT AND GET OUT OF THE CELL BUT FOR US. AND IT BECOMES, WE ARE LIKE A LIFE LINE, I THINK, TO THEM. THEY FEEL IT IS SOMETHING TO HOLD ON TO. AND THEY TRUST US A GREAT DEAL. IT IS VERY HARD WHEN YOU FIRST START, YOU ARE APT TO TAKE THE CASES HOME WITH YOU. IT IS VERY WEARING EMOTIONALLY QUITE OFTEN AND PHYSICALLY. I SUPPOSE, IT SATISFIES MY NEEDS TO FEEL NEEDED AND TO FEEL THAT I'M DOING SOMETHING FOR HUMANITY."

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